

the
church of
US vs.

Freedom
from a Faith That
Feeds on Making Enemies

them

DAVID E. FITCH

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**Freedom from a Faith
That Feeds on Making Enemies**

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To Rae Ann, my wife of almost twenty years—
a testament to her patience and long-suffering
in the unwinding of life's antagonisms.

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preface

I believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God for the church. I have signed a doctrinal statement affirming the inerrancy of Scripture (although I made note that it was too liberal for me). I believe conversion is central to the Christian life, and I believe all Christians are called to participate in God's mission of salvation, justice, and healing to the world. These beliefs pretty much make me an evangelical in the traditional use of the term. But something has happened in our culture these past few decades with regard to evangelicals and other like-minded Christians. Evangelicals have allowed these fundamental convictions to become the source of division, anger, and antagonism among us and between us and the people around us. In the process we've become the church of us vs. them. I contend that this has been disastrous for our witness to Christ and his lordship and salvation in North America. Many people no longer want to be identified as an evangelical as a result.

So in this book I examine how this happened. I look at how evangelicals' core beliefs morphed to change us into the church of us vs. them, and then at how to move beyond this. In the book, I do not provide a careful exposition of these doctrines themselves. This book isn't a systematic theology in any sense of the term.

Instead, I am trying to show how these beliefs and the ways we practice these beliefs have shaped us evangelicals, and other Christians alongside us, as a particular kind of people: an antagonistic people. In this sense, I'm writing a kind of political theology, answering the question, How do our beliefs and practices shape us to be a particular kind of people for mission in the world? In the process, I'm pushing for a renewed practice of reading Scripture, doing evangelism, and engaging culture that renews our presence as the witnesses to the reign of Jesus Christ as Lord in our culture.

I first explored these beliefs in this manner in the book *The End of Evangelicalism?* way back in 2011.¹ This present book seeks to engage on a popular level much of what I learned back then and have worked out in daily life as a church pastor/coach/professor since then. So this book often borrows from that book. Nonetheless, *The Church of Us vs. Them* is a completely different book seeking to apply those lessons to the current day. But for those interested in more of the theology and ideological analysis that drives this book, I encourage you to read *The End of Evangelicalism?* and to read the endnotes in this book, where I have put most of the academic work that undergirds this book's claims.

The stories in this book are purposefully disguised to protect the identities of the people involved. I not only change the names of people in the stories, I sometimes change the gender and other details of the characters, and in a couple cases I amalgamate the details of two people into one story. I do this with the intent of holding the integrity of stories intact while protecting the identities of the people involved.

Many thanks go to the people who made the writing of this book possible. My colleague Scot McKnight urged me to do it. Scott Boren, who had worked with me on a previous book, sold me on the idea that this book was important and worth doing. He helped organize my notes and lectures in the early stages of writing. Thanks to both Scot(t)s. Northern Seminary provided me a

sabbatical, during which some of the work on this book was done. Northern has been such a support to my work and an amazing, exciting place for the preparation of leaders this book pushes for. Many thanks to this truly special institution. The good people of Baker Publishing Group have been great all along the way in making this book possible. Thanks to Bob Hosack for shepherding this book into the good hands of Baker. A special thanks to James Korsmo for his editing work on this book. His work improved this book greatly. Lastly, special thanks goes to my family: my wife, Rae Ann, and my son, Max. They really do make so much of my own ministry of pastoring, writing, and professing possible.

For his glory!

introduction

Beyond Enemies?

We're living in angry times. Wherever we go, whether church, school, city hall, or Washington, DC; whatever we watch, whether cable television, Facebook, or the local theater; and however we do things, whether by email or Twitter or telephone, in person, or in a meeting—in it all, our culture is rife with conflict. Politics is full of strife, antagonisms, and vitriol. Everybody, it seems, is caught up with warding off yet another enemy. And so, many of us are just keeping our heads down, hoping to get through another day, causing as little trouble as we can. Something has gone terribly wrong in our country, and we don't know what to do about it.

Meanwhile, the church appears little different. Christians appear to be caught up in the same antagonism and disgust for one another that is evident elsewhere. We ourselves have become known for our own enemy making. We fight among ourselves on the various media while the world looks on. What has happened? Christians have failed to be known by our love, and the question is, Why?

How is it that Christians have failed at this most prescient moment to be a people of reconciliation and renewal in the face of all this tumult? And how do we get out of the mess to become a reconciling presence in the world through Jesus Christ? How can Christians respond in the face of this failure, to be the presence of his love, reconciliation, and healing in a world torn by strife and ugly conflict? And how can we keep our integrity and love for justice in the process? Imagine the amazing witness we'd have at this present time if we were known by the way we reconcile with, love, and restore one another. This book is born out of these questions. It asks, How can we be shaped by Christ into becoming these kinds of people? How can we become the reconciling presence of Christ in the world?

I Remember

I remember the summer of 1969, when as a young boy I saw the television pictures of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. His words—"That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind"—are now among the most recognized phrases ever spoken. But just a few years later the Apollo 13 accident happened. Here we remember the words, paraphrased and made famous in the movie *Apollo 13*—"Houston, we have a problem"—spoken by mission commander Jim Lovell after an explosion occurred on their ship. With Armstrong, there was this incredible surge of optimism in North America; humanity, we thought, could accomplish just about anything we put our mind to. But with Apollo 13, there was a sense that something had gone terribly wrong. Within a short time, the United States had journeyed from euphoria to tragedy and was facing the reality of how little control humanity has over the mysteries of space.

Today, the church finds itself in a similar place. We remember a time not too long ago (let's call it the 1950s) when the established church occupied a powerful place in North America. This was

largely a white majority North America. Protestant Christians were confident in our message, our institutions, and our authority in culture. We were oblivious to any of the negative impacts our version of Christianity was having on minority cultures. There was a sense of triumph in the air after World War II. For the “majority population” who lived in those times, Christians were part of a chosen people. We felt proud to be associated with the words “The truth is marching on.”¹

But half a century later, “we have a problem.” Christians from the “majority” church are on the defensive in our culture. Our churches are divided over politics, nationalism, race, and sexuality. In many cases, Christians find ourselves resented or even rejected wholesale by our cultures. Like a spacecraft trying to get back home, we are disoriented. But unlike Apollo 13, which had a sudden explosion accompanied by flashing warning lights, this problem has crept up on us slowly. The warning lights have been so subtle that we’ve been able to ignore them. But not so any longer.

Supposedly, a frog sitting in water that is slowly warmed does not realize it is being cooked by the heat until it is too late, and then the frog dies. If you were simply to drop the same frog into hot water, it would jump out immediately. The problems many Christians face today in North America have crept up on us so subtly that they are now the water we swim in and we cannot recognize it. Many of us don’t even see the flashing warning lights because they have become the standard by which the norm is evaluated. While the lights are going off, this creeping normalcy causes us to interpret these warnings as just another part of what it means to be a Christian today.

But deep down we know things are not as they are supposed to be. The anger, strife, and hatred that keep erupting point to the problem. And we need to name it so we can figure out how to respond. We need to look at the dashboard of this out-of-control spaceship and identify some of the lights that are flashing.

Flashing Light #1: The Loss of Christendom Influence

There was a time when many of us lived in a society that agreed on Christianity as the right way to live. It was a majority Euro-world's Christianity. And for those who were part of this majority, this environment was good and comfortable. But a warning light is flashing, telling us this world is breaking apart.

“Christendom” refers to a time period in the Middle Ages of Western Europe when all of society (church, state, schools, work, art) was united under the one umbrella of Christianity. Whether in work, education, politics, family, or money, all of life was ordered around the core beliefs in Christianity. Certainly it was never that simple. Still, more often than not, throughout most of medieval Europe, Christianity's influence dominated all of life.

The Reformation did little to change this Christendom framework; it only divided up territories and offered various versions of Christianity that would govern each territory—mostly Lutheran, Reformed, or Catholic.

As Christianity moved overseas to North America, Christendom worked in ways similar to the average modern experience of buying a car. In many American cities, competing car dealerships are built alongside one another along one big avenue. A person in the market for a car need only make his or her way to that general area of town and then test-drive a Ford, then a Honda, and then a Volvo, all within a short period of time. All the dealerships are quickly accessible on the same street. It is assumed, in a car-driving culture, that everyone drives a car. The only question then is, Which car best suits you? Similarly, in North America, Christendom assumes we all live in a society that follows Christian principles and beliefs. The question is, Which kind of Christianity best suits you? As a result, the Christian options in the North American version of Christendom all lined up to compete with one another like car dealerships competing for customers.

This backdrop of Christendom was everywhere in the North America of the 1950s. Those were the days when our parents (or grandparents) watched *The Andy Griffith Show*, with Andy attending church on Sundays and Barney singing in the choir. Billy Graham would put on a traditional evangelical Sunday service in a local football stadium and thousands showed up. Protestant churches would hold Sunday evening services and expect their regular members to bring nonpracticing Christians to hear the gospel preached. Television networks would honor Christian values in their programming. Public schools regularly allowed prayer to start the day. The government gave its nod to promote church life. Just like everybody knows you need a car to get around and work in our society, so everybody assumed you needed a church.

But the warning light is flashing to all who were once comfortable here. This Christendom world is breaking up. We cannot assume “our” Christian views will have sway like they once did. Christians naturally want to be comfortable again, but that world is gone. And so, every time sexuality or gender issues come up in our schools or local town hall meetings, or when we notice women wearing hijab at the grocery store, or when the church is criticized for its participation in racism, we, who were once the majority, want to defend that place we once called home. We divide up and go to the church “brand” that agrees with us. In the midst of these conflicts, we just want to guide the spaceship back home. But there’s no going home anymore and, with every new conflict busting out in our midst, the warning lights are flashing everywhere.

Flashing Light #2: The Problem of Christendom Habits

Habits from Christendom linger on in our churches. These habits revolve around ways of relating to everyone as if they are either already Christians (like us) or should be (what’s wrong with you?). Just as car manufacturers assume that everyone in North America

drives a car, Christians and our churches assume a lot of things about the people and the culture around us. These Christendom habits can be broken down into three categories.

First, there are the habits based in the way we talk. Christians in Christendom assume that everyone, even those who do not belong to a church, know our language. We assume people we meet every day know what we mean when we say words like “sin,” “salvation,” and “repent.” We assume that people we meet in everyday life know what the cross means and why designated religious holidays point to Christ. We assume that everyone, just like Billy Graham, believes what “the Bible says.” As a result, we are surprised when people don’t immediately understand or agree with our assertions about moral and social matters.

Second, Christians in Christendom assume people in the broader culture want to come to church; they just haven’t found the right one. Because culture once agreed with us on a lot of things, such as promiscuous sexuality, excess greed, marriage, alcohol, and freedom to worship, we focused on Christian life as something that takes place primarily in a building. We expect the culture to be in sync with Christianity, even if people out there do not go to church. Many of us now sit uncomfortably in front of the TV or at the theater, not knowing what to do with a culture that defies Christian values. How can we invite anyone to church?

Last, Christians in Christendom respect spiritual leaders and expect others to do the same. Christendom trains Christians to look up to and respect clergy. Pastors are those who are educated and ordained and who hold the office of pastor by virtue of either their credentials or their effective skills at preaching and leading. In the Christendom of the fifties, it was not unusual for local governments to consult the pastors in their cities on civic matters. Christians today have the carryover habit of expecting their pastors to have authority not only in their churches but in their communities. When they are shunned or discredited, it comes as a shock.

These are the habits of Christendom that once worked so well for so many. In large parts of the US and Canada, however, churches have to work harder to attract people to services. Our language no longer connects to the people we live alongside at work or in the neighborhood. Our institutions of Christianity, and their officials, do not garner respect in our society. For those of us who had gotten used to these things, we are like fish out of water. Our reflex is to get angry when we are challenged. Our feelings get hurt when we are rejected. Our first impulse is to lash out when other Christians dare to contradict what we have believed throughout our lives. We were used to being the majority. We're used to trusting our authorities. Now we are surrounded, and we do not know how to guide this spaceship we are on that is lost in a foreign culture.

Flashing Light #3: The Christendom Tendency to Make Enemies

There's an additional flashing light that is perhaps even more ominous than the previous two: the ever-increasing tendency among Christians to make enemies with each other. Somehow, when you put the assumption that everyone is or should be a Christian together with the Christendom habits of language ("You must speak like us"), power ("Our leader is right; how dare you challenge him/her?"), and church attendance ("Why are so many people going to that church?"), defensiveness breaks out. Suddenly we find ourselves seeing other Christian churches as the competition. We no longer see other Christians as being in common life together. We instead see that church down the road—the one that doesn't "do church" the same way we do—as the enemy. And herein lies something insidious that harms our witness in this world, perhaps more than any of the other flashing lights.

For centuries the church has advanced by trying to find a new version of church that corrects or improves on the previous version.

Lutheranism arose in reaction to the corruption of Catholicism in the Middle Ages. Innocent enough. In the midst of the Reformation, Calvin promoted a different option from Luther in response to Catholicism. Fine. But then the Pietists got fed up with the “faith-alone” stodginess of mainstream Lutherans and eventually formed their own churches. The Anglican Church arose out of (King Henry’s) frustration with the Roman Catholic Church; it broke away. The Wesleyan movement developed out of discontent with the moral laxity of the Anglican Church and went on to form a new church with “society meetings.” The Pentecostals found speaking in tongues and did the same. And of course there is the joke that the Baptists start a new church every time there’s a disagreement at the annual church business meeting.

Hundreds of years later it seems that dividing is in the DNA of Christendom. The process of forming new denominations in reaction to other denominations may have worked to foment creativity and vitality in the early years of North American Christianity.² But today, many years later, it seems all this dividing has taken on a new character in the midst of our changing culture. As our culture cares less about the church, we are clamoring for the loyalty of the Christians who are left. We are consolidating what power is left to have. We are defending our leaders with a new vigor, even when they fail miserably. And we seem to be surprised and increasingly upset when our culture doesn’t follow our lead, or seem to be the least bit concerned about following our lead, on moral issues. Our witness, as a people, to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has become tainted with the ugliness of enemy making. To the culture at large, the church has the look of a spaceship headed for a self-inflicted crash.

Here We Are

And so here we are, Christians, facing unparalleled challenges in our culture. Our culture is challenging us with regard to sexuality

and the truth of other religions and issues of racism and the church, of justice and economics. In response, we quote the Bible. We take sides against one another. We rally people around political parties who will do our bidding. We presume people will respect our arguments and choose sides, even when people aren't interested. Because we have been so used to power, we take positions against other churches on the Bible, salvation, and even justice. We can't stop ourselves. Trying to survive, we create new modes of church and new constituencies. Christianity becomes a set of belief statements that we argue either for or against with other Christians. And the actual practice of following Jesus becomes lost in the fray.

We carry these same habits into our engagements with non-Christians. We start arguing against non-Christians whom we assume should be Christians. The bad habits of infighting now turn us against the world. In regard to economics, racism, sexuality, and other religions, we find ourselves looking for the political party that best aligns with our position. We find ourselves arming for a fight. We are indistinguishable from the world.

A recent car commercial depicts real people entering a room full of the automaker's cars. The host says that he is going to display a list of awards that this car manufacturer has won and asks them to read the awards as quickly as possible as he scrolls through them on a screen. Of course, because there are so many awards, they cannot keep up. The commercial concludes with clips of people saying they are now in the market for a car and are excited to check out this specific make of car. On the surface, this seems like a convincing commercial. Everyone is happy to discover all the new cars available. Yet the commercial works because it subtly makes each customer feel better about a prospective purchase by proving this brand of car is better than other cars. That's the way the best advertising works. It creates in us the urge to measure ourselves and our choices against the other options. Subtly we feel good because we have chosen the better option. Meanwhile,

we are blind to the antagonism that is working to make us feel better about ourselves and our purchases.

This is where we are as the church in North America. We cannot help but make enemies in the way we do church in North America. As Christians, we have become blind to the antagonisms at work in our lives, both within the church and without. Old habits inherited from Christendom have shaped us to live and indeed even to thrive on antagonisms. Meanwhile, people outside the church look at us and see only conflict, anger, and even hate. Our witness to Christ is damaged. And as we enter the world, we've lost the wherewithal to engage what God is doing in Christ to save the world.

Beyond Enemies

In what follows, I aim to push us to go beyond this space of antagonism to a space I'd like to describe as "beyond enemies." This names the place I believe Christians are called to occupy in the world in and through Jesus Christ. It is a space made uniquely possible through Christ and his presence among us. It is the space that lies beyond the Christendom habits of making enemies.

The word "enemies" speaks to the way of the world that "others" the person(s) we disagree with. This is what defines an antagonism: the making of an enemy by turning someone into an "other." The world runs on antagonisms—what I call the "enemy-making machine." It's a social dynamic in which we are always forced to take sides. We then define our "selves" against someone via a position. Our identity becomes attached to this position. Our motivations and desires get aligned with this position. We start to defend ourselves at all costs. Our joys and sorrows become strangely formed around what happens day by day in the success of our position. Before we know it, we are stuck in this position, permanently ensconced in the violence of the world. In so

doing, ideology comes into being, and we are thoroughly buying into it.

“Beyond” speaks to the way this place is not a middle space or a place of compromise between two positions. Rather, this space is from God, opened by the presence of Christ, and always working for something new that could not have been anticipated. If the world is ideological in the sense described above, we must get beyond the ideological. So “beyond” is not a third way that mediates between the previous two ways in conflict. It is a space where we are still able to be who we are. Indeed, we become *more* of who we are because, in this space, we can extend further into being faithful to Christ and his kingdom. And yet it escapes the current frame of anger, antagonism, and violence in the world.³ And it is Christ’s supernatural presence that breaks the hold of the antagonistic frame. He is what makes the space possible. This is the space, I contend, the church must occupy and open up in a world that is not Christian. This is the space where Christ comes to work. It is not “us vs. them”; it is the space beyond enemies.

Admittedly, such a space is hard to imagine. It seems that the church, especially since the 2016 US presidential election, has fallen deeply into the habits of positioning, anger, and coercion. The old habits of Christendom die slowly. And yet God, I contend, cannot work his mission for the world via the anger, antagonism, and violence that characterize the world apart from God. If the church is to open up a new space beyond enemies for the work of Christ in the world, it must do so by his Spirit, through his presence.

But it must happen first among ourselves. In order to enter the world, we must first become the place the world can recognize as beyond enemies. We must first deal with our own antagonisms. Once freed, we then can enter the world in peace, opening up space for Christ to work in the world. As I have argued elsewhere, this is how God has chosen to change the world through a people.⁴

The Example of Jeremy

At a recent conference, after I had finished my presentation, a man named Jeremy made a beeline from his seat to the front of the room where I was standing. He approached me quickly, told me how he had been a pastor for twelve years and how he was now ready to quit. He confessed, “It’s one thing after another, conflict after conflict. I don’t know how to lead anymore. They want me to give the right answers, but when I don’t tell them what they want to hear, they run off down the road to another church that will. And the reality is that no one outside of the church cares. Our fights, our opinions, our squabbles over our inside church debates just don’t matter. But I don’t know how to lead a church out of this. I am sick of it, but it’s what I was trained to do. What am I supposed to do now?”

Jeremy was seeing the flashing lights on the dashboard. Like Jim Lovell in *Apollo 13*, he was announcing, “Church, we have a problem.” The church had become the church of us vs. them. And just as that rocket ship could not land on the moon, so too, we must confess with Jeremy that our way of being the church today is not landing in our culture. Our “enemy making” works against who Jesus is and what he is doing in the world.

And so, in coming to grips with the situation of the church in North America, we can ignore the flashing lights and continue in the habits we have become so comfortable in. Indeed, we can fight harder and try to build even bigger and better versions of the same churches to attract people to our buildings and programs. Or we can pause and take our churches in for a checkup on these habits we have become so used to. We can open up space for the unwinding of these antagonisms and the beginning of a new work of God among us. The old ways of Christendom will still succeed at times, maybe even enough to make us think they’re working. But Christendom is waning, our churches are in survival mode, and many of our pastors are struggling. It’s time to pursue a way beyond the church of us vs. them.

In what follows, we'll unwind the antagonisms that have driven the last hundred years of church in North America. We'll deconstruct the old Christendom habits that drive how we think about and practice Scripture, conversion, and even justice. We'll explore faithful ways to think about these core beliefs, ways that don't gather people by making enemies but instead gather a church into Christ's presence for his mission in the world. We'll explore how unwinding habits of the past will change our very posture and presence in our neighborhoods to meet the cultural challenges we face in mission. We'll look for ways to open up a new space beyond enemies to bring the gospel of Christ's kingdom to our culture.